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The Role of Conflict Management Styles in Navigating Work Place Disputes at Higher Education Institutions in Pakistan

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Abstract

Teachers, administrators, and students at nearly every Pakistani university eventually have to deal with conflict. This paper's overarching goal is to provide a critical analysis of the most prevalent forms of conflict management that institutions and organizations face daily, namely those that pertain to tasks and relationships. This paper has covered the effects of several conflict management methods on disagreements over tasks and relationships, including giving in, compromising, problem-solving, forcing, and avoiding. Various forms of disputes call for diverse approaches to conflict management.

Keywords: Conflict Management Styles, Conflict Management at Workplace Disputes, Conflict Management at HEIs in Pakistan

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Title

The Role of Conflict Management Styles in Navigating Work Place Disputes at Higher Education Institutions in Pakistan

Abstract

Teachers, administrators, and students at nearly every Pakistani university eventually have to deal with conflict. This paper's overarching goal is to provide a critical analysis of the most prevalent forms of conflict management that institutions and organizations face daily, namely those that pertain to tasks and relationships. This paper has covered the effects of several conflict management methods on disagreements over tasks and relationships, including giving in, compromising, problem-solving, forcing, and avoiding. Various forms of disputes call for diverse approaches to conflict management.

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Introduction

Organizational conflict is a normal, permanent phenomenon, and continues to occupy remarkable attention, especially in organizations like higher learning institutions where there are different groups and individuals with different beliefs, expectations, and requirements (McKibben, 2017). Similar issues

are with higher education institutions in Pakistan where the faculty members identified task conflict as the conflict arising due to professional responsibility and identified interpersonal conflict due to differences in perspectives (Akhtar and Syeda, 2021). In universities for instance, task and relationship conflict if not addressed may result in reduced



productivity, high rates of turnover, and abandonment of organizational objectives such as teaching, research activities or grant approvals among others (Ababio, 2022). On the other hand, proper handling of these conflicts is beneficial for an academic environment; the overall organizational commitment is increased, creativity improves, and the strength of the team is built up (Mwesigwa et al., 2020). Conflict management hence arises from the dual concern theory as many of the research sources of conflict management assert that people intentionally make decisions based on concern toward self and others (Caputo et al., 2018; Ayub et al., 2017). This model identifies five key conflict management styles: interacting, enforcing, accommodating, collaborating, and avoiding, each of which can have a different influence on conflicts in the workplace. Organizational commitment is essential for the success of higher education institutions and literature has reflected a positive relationship of effective conflict management techniques. Using integrating, obliging, and compromising tactics in conflict, continuance, normative, and affective commitments to the organization foster and are enhanced (Zhang, Fenn, and Fu, 2019; Ababio, 2022).

In the setting of higher education institutions in Pakistan, conflict management styles have a central function. The capacity of the faculty to manage workplace conflict affects individual and/or organizational benefits and organizational mission, goals, and outcomes. Therefore, it is possible to identify more effective conflict management approaches used by university faculty to achieve better results in the flow of a harmonious and committed workforce in the higher education institutions of Pakistan.

Objectives of the Study

- To assess the moderating effects of yielding, compromising, and problem-solving and avoiding on-task conflict at higher learning institutions in Pakistan.
- To measure how much the use of the forcing technique has harmed the management of task conflicts in higher education institutions in Pakistan
- To examine how specific conflict management styles, including yielding and compromising, problem-solving can enhance the relationship issues in higher education institutions in Pakistan
- To examine how forcing and avoiding behavior is destructive for relationship management in

workplace conflict resolution in higher education institutions in Pakistan.

Literature Review:

Introduction

Any group or institution is certain to experience conflict at some point. Disputes between strangers loved ones, or coworkers are inevitable in each human relationship (To et al., 2021). Faculty and students in Pakistan's higher education institutions often find themselves at odds on matters of assignment and interpersonal dynamics. For academic departments to run well, they must master efficient conflict management techniques (Akhtar and Syeda, 2021). Personal values (actual or perceived), perceptions, competing objectives, power dynamics, communication style, etc. are common sources of conflict, among many others. An organization's collaboration and output can be enhanced by learning how each person handles conflict. A study by Rahim and Katz (2019) indicated that when people learn to recognize issues and resolve them fairly and effectively, they are engaging in conflict management. Reducing the likelihood of undesirable consequences and increasing the likelihood of favorable outcomes are the objectives. Almost every higher education institution in Pakistan according to Haider, Ahmad, and Ali (2024) is home to a variety of student groups. The primary sources of social conflicts among students, in addition to disputes about tasks and relationships, are the various organizations' varying levels of education, morality, standards, schools of thought, and religious connections. Classroom disputes, conflicts between teachers and students, conflicts between students and administration, etc., are among the other significant types of conflicts.

Empirical Studies

Task Conflict

Task conflict fosters innovation, creativity, and critical thinking. Conflicts in the workplace can arise from a variety of sources, including but not limited to: divergent views on the best way to conduct surveys, management initiatives, scientific studies, etc (Thornhill-Miller et al., 2023). A study by (Isaksen et al., 2023) obtains an examination of ideas and solutions when team members have different viewpoints and discuss different possibilities. When team members' opinions are heard and respected, task conflict usually leads to constructive debate and boosts morale. Some companies, according to Grant, intentionally foster task conflict by instituting challenge networks, which are communities of critical

thinkers. Conflicts between tasks can be productive if handled correctly. By applying the following tactics according to Cameron McGaughy (2023) at higher education institutions, faculty members may play a vital role as a management team in resolving task conflict:

- The members of management should have their duties and obligations spelled out.
- Motivate your team members to talk to each other and listen to what they have to say.
- Stay focused on what you're doing. Instead of worrying about who can win an argument or who can prove someone incorrect, team members should work to discover the optimal solution.
- Find common ground and areas of disagreement. Through this, team members will be able to easily reach an agreement.

Relationship Conflict

Conflict in relationships is bad. Relationship problems might arise from poorly handled work conflicts at higher education institutions. Negative feelings and lower output are the results of interpersonal disputes on the job (Folger et al., 2021). On rare occasions, task conflict can be a manifestation of relationship conflict. There may be relational problems at play if you find that the same people often argue about tasks, even when none of them are actually at fault. Conflicts in relationships at higher education institutions specifically in Pakistan can be handled in the following ways as mentioned in the study by Aghaei, Iman (2022);

- Outline expectations for team members' behavior, including how to handle disagreements, and make sure everyone follows them.
- To fix problems in relationships, people need to talk to each other and listen to each other.
- Have one-on-one conversations with the team members who are at odds with one another to get to the bottom of what's causing the dispute. Stay neutral and do not display any bias.
- Emotional intelligence is essential for conflict resolution in relationships. Arguments get heated and people start attacking each other when this happens (Aghaei, Iman, 2022)

Theoretical Background and Conceptual Framework

Navigating workplace disagreements at higher education institutions or any organizational platform can be approached using several conflict

management styles. The present paper has employed the theoretical framework of dual concern for the purpose of explaining the management of conflicts. The described theory has contributed towards postulating that individuals choose different strategies for managing conflicts with regard to their pro-social orientation and self-concerns for other individuals. Concerns for other individuals have been perceived as negative as they contributed towards reflecting pro-self-motivation (Caputo, Marzi, Maley, & Silic, 2018). The dual concern model has narrated five significant styles for managing conflicts which have included yielding, compromising, problem-solving forcing, and avoiding

Yielding according to the research study by Todorova, Goh, and Weingart (2021) is potential harvesting when people yield, they either give up to the other side's demands or work with them while paying little to no regard to their interests. Assisting without expecting it in return, making promises that cannot be broken, and compromising unilaterally are all characteristics of this style. Putting the connection or the common good ahead of one's own goals is at the heart of this concept. As a conflict management strategy, it is highly effective. On the other hand, compromising is looking for a position where people's gains are equal to their losses. Finding a compromise means actively trying to balance each side's objectives while also matching their concessions and making conditional promises or threats. To resolve a disagreement or conflict, it is common practice for both parties to make concessions (Todorova, Goh, and Weingart, 2021). Moreover, problem-solving is finding a solution that works for all sides. Because finding common ground and solutions that work for everyone involved requires open communication, this approach places a premium on providing information (Guerrero, 2019). Supporting and expecting regular, courteous, and productive communication and settlement of problems is an example of the problem-solving type.

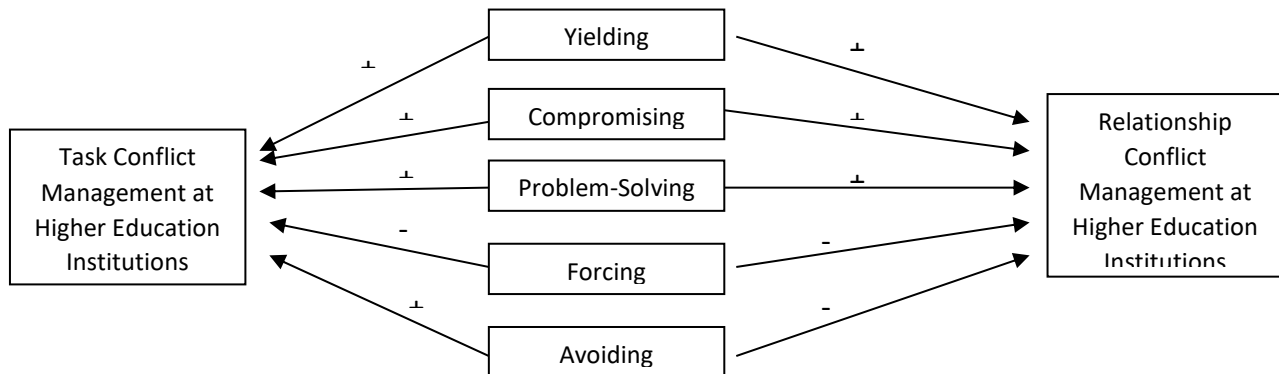
Next, a study by Rispens, Jehn, and Steinel (2020) indicated that, forcing is using force to win the battle by making the opposing side pay. It involves using "hard" influence methods, especially being aggressive, to get one's desired outcome. Even when the other person is resistant, the individual persists in pursuing their issues. This may be being firmly opposed to another person's activities or advocating for one perspective while downplaying another. Finally, the goal of the avoidant approach is to minimize or eliminate confrontations wherever possible. It shows that you don't care about the other person or yourself very much. So, those who attempt

to avoid thinking about the dispute do their best to conceal it. By avoiding eye contact and ignoring the source of the problem, the avoidant approach might exacerbate existing tensions. Also, the opposite side,

encouraged by the lack of conflict, can end up getting the incorrect benefit of the doubt (Masangya et al., 2022).

Figure 1

Conceptual framework



Hypotheses Development

1. The approaches of yielding, compromising, problem-solving, and avoiding all positively impact the management of task conflict at higher education institutions in Pakistan.
2. The use of the forcing technique negatively impacted the management of task conflicts at higher education institutions in Pakistan.
3. Relationship issues can be positively impacted by adopting a style of yielding, compromising, or problem-solving at higher education institutions in Pakistan.
4. Relationship styles are negatively impacted by forcing and avoiding behaviors at higher education institutions in Pakistan.

Methodology

Research Design

The present study adopted a qualitative research method along with practicing semi-structured interviews to examine conflict management styles for handling conflicts in higher education institutions in Pakistan. The rationale for this approach was to get qualitative information pertinent to conflict-solving strategies in organizations, as well as university faculty members' perception of the identified conflict-solving approaches on the organizational climate (Ruslin et al., 2022). A cross-sectional design was used and the data was analyzed thematically meaning that patterns and themes that were repeated in the participants' responses were identified from the data.

Sample

The subjects for this study were 50 university teachers

(25 male and 25 female) from both public and private sector universities in Punjab and the Federal capital Islamabad. The participants were 40 years old on average, $SD = 7.85$, and had been working for about 11 years, $SD = 4.93$. In this case, a purposive sampling approach was used and the respondents had enough experience with conflict within their academic departments. The inclusion criteria meant that the teachers the study involved must have served for at least two years under a given department chairperson and were involved in a conflict. Teachers who were on visiting contracts or provided short-term service were not included purposely so that the study would get more permanent tutors who would offer long-term relationship and conflict perspectives. In this research, the universities have been selected from the approved list of HEC of Pakistan and those which are ranked high. The participants were selected based on their age, the rank they held in the academic institution, and how long they had worked within the institution thus extending the research's coverage of conflict management styles across groups of various demography in different institutional setups.

Data Collection Instruments

The research tool used to gather data is a semi-structured interview questionnaire aimed at elucidating conflict management/activity approaches, as well as the effects that these in turn have within a working environment. The questions used for the interviews were developed according to Rahim's (1983) classification of the conflict management styles that change integrating, obliging, compromising, avoiding, and dominating styles. The interview questions focused on gathering data on the

type of relationships participants had with other colleagues and chairpersons when exposed to these styles, the overall level of organizational commitment, and the level of job satisfaction. Semi-structured interviews were also used because they provided persons under study with the chance to give their account of incidents in detail. All interviews lasted from 45 minutes to one hour depending on how much the participants were willing to disclose and these interviews could be either face-to-face or through a video link.

Data Analysis

Data obtained from the interviews conducted were analyzed using thematic analysis concerning Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step guide. The first of them is the acquaintance with the data, in which all the interviews were taken on a verbatim basis, and the researchers themselves read the transcripts of the interviews several times to get an idea of the content of the interviews performed. The second process was that of developing initial codes where the portions of the data that appeared relevant to conflict management styles and organizational commitment were underlined and highlighted systematically. The technique used in the third step was sorting the codes into potential themes. Thus, thematic categories such

as 'types of conflicts,' 'conflict management strategies,' 'impact of work relationships,' 'organizational commitment, and 'supporting training needs' were identified. The fourth step entailed re-examining the themes to compare and contrast the emerging codes with the coded data and the overall data set to conform to the participants' experiences. The fifth step was that of defining and naming themes where the final themes were defined properly and often included specific quotes from the participants' responses.

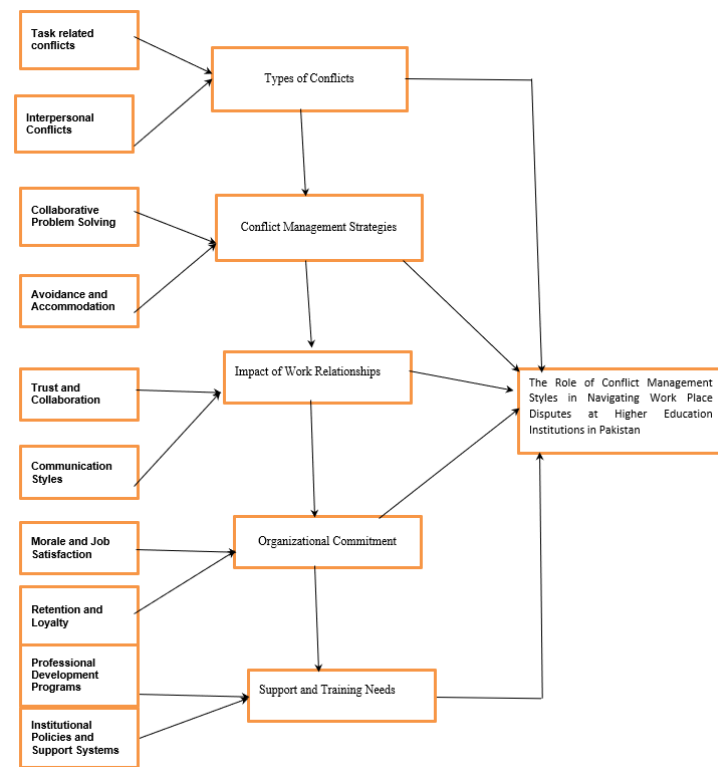
Ethical Considerations

In this study, the ethical approval sought and granted from the institutional review board of the affiliated university came before the commencement of the study. Informed written consent was sought from all participants and they were informed that their responses would not disclose any identification. Potential participants were informed of the aims and goals of the research and were informed that their participation was voluntary and could withdraw from the research at any time without any consequences. All the ethical features including information and consent, privacy, and rights of the participants as well as the users were followed in the research process.

Thematic Analysis:

Thematic Diagram

Figure 2



Analysis:

Types of Conflicts

The interviews revealed two primary types of conflicts among faculty members that have been categorized into task characteristics or relationship characteristics. Interpersonal conflict about a task arises when there are divergent views on practices in academics. Dr Sarah commented, "There are times that I got into arguments of how best to tackle a research; while some people believe in conventional research, others argue for creativity." This is good to elucidate that such disagreements help facilitate newness. On the other hand, relational conflict can stem from differences borne by the individuals within a certain relationship. Dr Ali said, "I have also found myself disagreeing with colleagues over perceived personality issues such as how one communicates or reports to superiors." Several interviewees commented that both task and relationship conflict partially overlap with one another, as stated by Dr. Fatima: "Relation conflicts can fuel task conflicts." This complexity means that it becomes necessary to determine the best ways of overseeing conflicts to strengthen team support and dedication within higher learning institutions.

Conflict Management Strategies

The interviews illustrated different techniques that the faculty members use to address conflict in the workplace. Dr. Ahmed also noted that it was essential to share ideas, so he always tried to make them talk about the conflicts. According to him, "The reason why it serves us well is that it helps to make mutual understanding easier. I think this is one of the ways that demonstrate that the function is taking a proactive role in conflict resolution". Dr. Noor talked about compromising strategies saying "Sometimes it is important to find the middle ground to avoid conflict and push our projects forward." Also, Dr. Zara pointed out the importance of possible conflict-solving, saying, "If people are opposed to each other, I draw all parties and solve the problem together." Some of the faculties interviewed held similar views, probably typical of a rational economic person, such as Dr. Imran who mentioned that he "does not like fight and usually try to avoid it as much as possible because they tend to escalate." This theme highlights the range of outcomes associated with a range of approaches to conflict employed by the faculty and the creation of a collaborative academic climate.

Impact of Work Relationships

The interviews showed that work relationships and

conflict management are strongly related to each other in the faculty members. Dr. Aisha said 'Good working relationships with co-workers reduce the emergence of many conflicts; if people have trust between them the issues arising do not seem harmful'. This implies underlining the roles of positive relationships in playing a protective measure towards the conflicting parties. Similarly, Dr. Kamal said, 'If there is a good workplace relationship, we can even discuss a contentious issue and yet we are not enemies', meaning it is easy to discuss with people you like and this does not make you an enemy. However, when it comes to work relations, negative relations contribute to escalating conflicts. Dr. Saima noted 'I saw how poor relationship makes things more personal so that conflicts become harder to resolve themselves'. This clearly shows that, whereas the existence of relationships aids conflict processes, negative relationship hinders or enhances conflicts. Finally, the role of work relationships is important in facilitating a supportive academic climate through a conducive conflict management system.

Organizational Commitment

The authors identified that conflict management strategy has a big implication on organizational commitment among the faculty. Dr. Omar said that "constructive resolution of conflict, makes him feel in tune with his institution, and increases the likelihood of his commitment to duty". Such a sentiment is evidence of the ability of effective conflict resolution on the side of faculty morale and loyalty. To this, Dr Laila admitted, that open discussion and solving problems together make them feel good about the mission of the organization hence increased commitment. On the other hand, conflicts that have not been worked out resulted in disengagement. Dr. Tariq said, "Often when situations are unsettled, the working environment becomes quite unpleasant and puts into question one's loyalty towards the university." This goes a long way in explaining how badly mismanaged conflicts can affect faculty commitment. Thus, the theme shows that promoting constructive approaches to conflict management is crucial for increasing commitment and consequent retention in higher education institutions.

Support and Training Needs

From the interviews, the need for support and training on conflict management among the faculty could not be overemphasized. One of the interviewees said "This disagreement can be attributed to the fact that as much as we encounter conflicts, we do not get

trained on how best to effectively address them. Workshops would be immensely helpful." This supports the current deficiency of the support structure and the need for more training programs to properly handle conflicts. Dr. Faisal said, 'More courses on conflict tactics would enable us to deal with conflicts effectively and promote cooperation.' Also, Dr. Mina emphasized on organizational aspect and stated, "It is also better if our institution offered more recommendations and models on conflict solving." For such reasons, these responses demonstrate that Faculty members appreciate the need for a more structured approach and organized training in relation to conflict resolution. In the long run, meeting such training needs may surely boost the faculty's capability to deal with conflicts and overall improve the health of the organizational climate.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to identify conflict management practices of faculty members in higher education institutions in Pakistan covering the nature of conflicts, modes of managing them, relationships at work, organizational commitment, and support required. The implications are presented to draw attention to practical knowledge of conflict processes that define the academic context and modulate the behavior of teachers. The interviews highlighted two primary types of conflicts: task-related and emotional. Task-related was further broken down into two aspects, which were planning and coordination; while relationship-based was also further divided into two, which were, trust and openness. This is supported by Dr. Sarah who described how; task interdependence fostered through conflicting academic practices can stimulate innovation and creativity. This is in line with Thornhill-Miller et al., (2023), which post that constructive task conflict enhances problem solving. However, conflict that arises from the relationship aspect may make it difficult for the individuals to work together since they do not like each other.

Dr. Ali Similar to Folger et al. (2021) has also observed that unresolved interpersonal issues cause unfavorable morale and output overall. The faculty members used the different conflict management approaches effectively. One of the identified tactical approaches was communication which was described by Dr. Ahmed as the necessity to discuss. This is in consonant with the theoretical perspective of dual concern where an individual can meet his own needs as well as care for other people (Caputo et al., 2018). Furthermore, compromising strategies also mentioned by Dr. Noor represent realistic strategies to control conflict, and the problem-solving strategies

underlined by Dr. Zara, show that other inclusive strategies can help to improve team cooperation. Yet again, this paper observes those avoidance strategies that Dr. Imran has mentioned; resulting in unresolved conflicts that only propagate the conflict rather than pointing at the need for proactive conflict management techniques. This study also showed that the cases of work relationships predict conflict management. Primitive communication structures enable good discussion as seen by Dr. Aisha while aggressive communication structures escalate the conflicts. This reinforces the findings of Rahim and Katz (2019), who argue that strong interpersonal bonds are crucial for effective conflict resolution. Additionally, the theme of organizational commitment was closely linked to conflict management styles. Constructive conflict resolution fosters a sense of connection to the institution, enhancing faculty morale, as illustrated by Dr. Omar and Dr. Laila. In contrast, unresolved conflicts can lead to disengagement, echoing the concerns of Dr Tariq regarding the negative impact of workplace disputes. Lastly, the interviews underscored a pressing need for support and training in conflict management. Faculty members expressed the desire for structured training programs, reflecting the findings of Akhtar and Syeda (2021), who emphasize the importance of developing effective conflict management skills in academic settings.

Conclusion

The current research aimed to investigate the nature of conflict among faculty members of higher education institutions in Pakistan and their approach towards conflict resolution that developed a multi-fold understanding of conflict and organizational commitment. The results show that there are both task and relationship conflicts present in the teams, which proves that both types are different and offer various prospects for creativity. These conflicts were reported to be best addressed through the use of such measures as communicating with the opponent, especially through the use of compromise, and through cooperation toward finding the best solution for the problem. Based on the analysis of the results of the work, it was identified that the form of work relations determines the nature of the conflict and the effectiveness of their regulation. However, the study also showed that there are still significant gaps in providing support and training in both conflict identification and mitigation.

Moreover, the faculty revealed their concern about the current lack of consistent training models that would prepare them for efficiently tackling

conflicts. To fill this culture is crucial in an attempt to promote better interpersonal relations in institutions. The following recommendations can be made on the grounds of the study. First, higher education institutions should organize weekly meetings and seminars to teach participants essential conflict-solving skills (Kilag et al., [2023](#)). They should focus more on interaction skills, interpersonal identities, and staff conflict-solving in groups. Second, institutions should ensure that culture supports dialogue in which faculty members freely report their

experiences and possible ways of solving a conflict (Guzzardo et al., [2020](#)). This could be made through established peer support groups or even through mentoring programs. Further, it may also be useful to consider guidelines about conflict resolution, which will assist the institutions' faculties in resolving disputes more effectively. Some of these could prove to be rather helpful especially as structured frameworks help in achieving better results in conflict resolution.

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Appendix

1. Can you describe a recent conflict you experienced with your department chairperson or colleagues?.
2. How do conflicts typically arise in your department? What are the main sources of these conflicts?
3. What conflict management strategies do you typically use when dealing with disagreements at your workplace?
4. Which conflict management style do you find most effective in resolving disputes with your department chairperson? Why?
5. Have you ever used the integrating style (collaborating) to resolve conflicts? If so, can you share an example of when this approach was successful?
6. How comfortable are you with using the obliging style (accommodating) in conflicts? Does it influence your long-term relationship with your colleagues or chairperson?
7. Can you recall an instance where you had to avoid a conflict? What was the outcome of that decision?
8. Have you experienced a situation where the dominating (competing) conflict management style was used? How did it impact your working relationship?
9. How do you balance between integrating and compromising when facing a conflict that seems hard to resolve?
10. Do you think the way conflicts are handled in your department affects your commitment to the organization? If so, how?
11. How does the conflict management style of your department chairperson influence your job satisfaction and loyalty to the institution?
12. In your opinion, how does a well-managed conflict contribute to the overall productivity and morale of your department?
13. Do you feel that unresolved or poorly managed conflicts have led to any long-term challenges in your professional growth or commitment to your university?
14. Do you believe there is sufficient support and training for faculty members in your institution regarding conflict management? What kind of training would be helpful?
15. How do you think university leadership can better support staff in resolving conflicts more constructively?